

*Helping Children, Teens and Families
Recover and Stay Well*



*Helpful Information for Living with
the September 11th Disaster*

Distributed by



*Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation &
Substance Abuse Services
Office of Substance Abuse Services*

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INTRODUCTION

The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centers have impacted families and communities in Northern Virginia and across the Commonwealth. Local and national news programs report on new military and terrorist activities each day and military families throughout the Commonwealth prepare for call up and deployment. The Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, with input from the Virginia Departments of Education, Juvenile Justice, Criminal Justice Services and Health, has developed this booklet to help parents, teachers, and teens manage their own grief and stress caused by the events on September 11, 2001, and to assist them in helping children cope with fear, confusion, loss, and insecurity.

This material is taken in part from the websites of The Center of Mental Health Services, the American Psychological Association, the Virginia and U.S. Departments of Education, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

While printed material is helpful, we encourage you to contact your local community services board, school principal or counselor, Office on Youth, Health Department, faith center, or the Red Cross if you need assistance or wish to offer assistance to others.

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Office of Compensatory Programs

Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice
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Virginia Department of Health
Office of Family Health Services

Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services

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GENERAL INFORMATION ON CHILDREN EXPERIENCING DISASTERS

Whether a child has personally experienced trauma or has merely seen the event on television or heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, then begin to show worrisome behavior. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers to recognize problems and respond appropriately.

Preschool Age

Children from one to five years in age find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. These youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. Preschoolers may resume thumb-sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it over and over. Some children may experience nightmares and need reassurance.

Early Childhood

Children aged five to eleven may have some of the same reactions as younger boys and girls. In addition, they may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to "more childish" behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.



Adolescence

Children twelve to fourteen are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, school work, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist authority, become

disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug abuse.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.

HELPFUL IDEAS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

- L Reassurance is the key to helping children through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of touch and cuddling, as well as verbal support.
- L Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely.
- L Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, drawing, or painting. Help them find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster.
- L Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity.
- L Reduce your expectations temporarily about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal chores.
- L Be calm. Children take emotional cues from parents and other significant adults.
- L Reassure children that they and their loved ones are safe. Explain that the World Trade Center and Pentagon were targeted by the terrorists because they symbolize our nation's economic and military strength and that schools, homes, and other offices are safe.
- L Monitor or restrict viewing of television coverage. Overexposure to graphic scenes can traumatize young children.
- L Remind children that good people such as police officers, firemen, doctors, emergency medical technicians, and members of the armed services are helping those who are hurt and are working to prevent additional attacks.
- L Remind children that it is not fair to blame all members of a religious or ethnic group for the actions of a few.
- L Acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the traumatic event, and take steps to

promote your own physical and emotional healing.

- L Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- L Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you have also experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- L Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you – such as talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- L Find support groups that are led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- L Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of rest and follow an exercise program. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing enjoyable activities. Avoid alcohol and drugs.

TIPS FOR TEENS

- Q Recognize that it is normal to feel anxious about your own safety, to picture the event in your own mind, and to wonder how you would react in an emergency.
- Q Recognize that people react in different ways to trauma. Some become irritable or depressed, others lose sleep or have nightmares, others deny their feelings or simply "blank out" the troubling event.
- Q Be honest about your feelings and allow yourself to acknowledge the sense of loss and uncertainty.
- Q Realize that, while things may seem off balance for a while, your life will return to normal.
- Q Talk with someone about your sorrow, anger, and other emotions, even though it may be difficult to get started.



- Q Recognize that it is common to want to strike back at people who have caused great pain. This desire comes from our outrage for the innocent victims. We must understand, though, that it is futile to respond with more violence. Nothing good is accomplished by hateful language or actions.
- Q Seek ways to help those in need in your community. Your time and attention are special gifts that can help others.

WHEN TO GET HELP

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that result from trauma.

HELPFUL IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

- T Let children express their feelings, including anger. Inform parents if children display extreme levels of anxiety, fear, or anger. If warranted, advise parents of the availability of school and community counseling services.
- T Empower children by telling them that there are things they can do to help. Children can make and send get well cards to injured survivors or write letters to the families of victims. Children can also put up flags or create patriotic posters or displays to express their support for our country during this time.
- T Be mindful of children who may have a personal connection to the



tragedies in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Children who have recently visited the Pentagon or the World Trade Centers may feel a personal loss.

- T Adhere to established school schedules and classroom routines.
- T Directly address potentially upsetting information with students rather than announcing it over public address systems.
- T Allow time for age-appropriate classroom discussion of current events. Teachers should guide discussions but not dominate.
- T Listen for student's cues while providing information and guiding discussions of current events.
- T Be sensitive to the anxiety some students may feel if a parent or other loved one is required to travel, especially by air.
- T Help children understand that most individuals who are from other countries are fine and good people who respect and admire the United States.
- T Engage in patriotic activities. Say the Pledge of Allegiance, sing patriotic songs, or read books about courage.

TIPS FOR PROMOTING TOLERANCE

Ideas for Yourself

- " Speak up when you hear slurs. Let people know biased speech is always unacceptable.
- " Imagine what your life might be like if you were a person of another race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Ideas for Your Home

- " Invite someone of a different background to join your family for a meal or holiday.
- " Don't buy playthings that promote or glorify violence.
- " Take the family to an ethnic restaurant. Learn about more than just the food.
- " Affirm your children's curiosity about race and ethnicity. Point out that people come in many shades.

Ideas for Your School

- " Donate tolerance-related books, films, magazines, and other materials to school libraries.
- " Start a pen pal program. Get students in touch with people in different parts of the community, country, or world.
- " Provide confidential methods for students to report harassment or bullying.

Ideas for Your Community

- " Start a monthly "diversity roundtable" to discuss critical issues facing your community.
- " Start a "language bank" of volunteer interpreters for all languages used in your community.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For Parents

American Psychological Association

www.helping.apa.org/daily/traumaticstress.html

www.apa.org/practice/ptguidelines.html

Substance Abuse Mental Health Services, Center for Mental Health Services

www.mentalhealth.org/schoolviolence/parents.htm

www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/EmergencyServices/helpchildren.htm

for articles and fact sheets:

www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/EmergencyServices/fpubs.htm

Virginia Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services

www.dmhmrzas.state.va.us

Virginia Department of Health

www.vdh.state.va.us

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm



Children's Defense Fund:

www.childrensdefense.org/resources_tragedy.htm

For Teachers

U.S. Department of Education

www.ed.gov/inits/september11/educators.html

www.ed.gov/inits/september11/adults.html

Virginia Department of Education

www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/virginia_responds.html

For Racial and Ethnic Tolerance

Southern Poverty Law Center

www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp

www.tolerance.org/10_ways/index.html;

for parents and children:

www.tolerance.org/pt/index.html

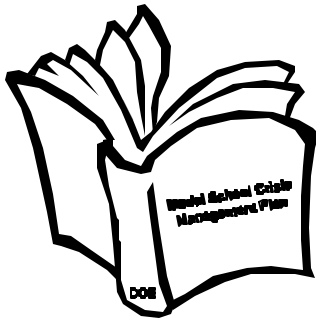
For Children

Discovery.Com

www.school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/stereotypes/#pro

U.S. Department of Justice

www.usdoj.gov/kidspage/hate.pdf



Sesame Street

www.sesameworkshop.org

Model School Crisis Management Plan Developed by the Virginia Department of Education and available in both print and electronic formats for schools to use as a template, adapting it for their own local use. The pdf version of the Model School Crisis Management Plan uses Adobe Acrobat.

www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Instruction/model.pdf

ASSISTANCE

Counselors and Prevention Specialists are available to meet with families, faith centers, and other organizations to talk about the September 11th disaster. Call your community services board for information and assistance.

Check the public service numbers in your local phone book to find the community services board, Office on Youth or Health Department in your area. Many schools have guidance counselors who can help with school-related problems. State agencies can also help you identify local services.



Community Services Boards
1 (800) 451-5544

Office on Youth
(804) 786-5914

Virginia Department of Health
Office of Family Health Services
(804) 371-0478

Local School Guidance Counselors
(804) 225-2871

NOTES AND PHONE NUMBERS



This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. In the top right corner, there is a small, stylized cartoon illustration of a right hand holding a black pen, positioned as if about to write. The hand is light-skinned with a simple outline, and the pen is black with a silver-colored clip.
